This is a remarkable story about Lead Peace, a middle school service-learning program. Service learning is about students learning and growing through meaningful service to their own or other communities. It’s a story of heroes who become leaders and a story about “what works” to help young people grow in healthy ways.
Prologue: Offered through middle schools in Minneapolis neighborhoods with high poverty and violence, Lead Peace aims to promote adolescents’ school success and reduce their risk of violence. This story showcases a long-standing successful partnership between Minneapolis Public Schools, Hennepin County Research, Planning, and Development Department, and a University of Minnesota team led by Dr. Renee Sieving, Associate Professor in the School of Nursing.

Story Heroes: Lead Peace engages 6th to 8th grade students clustered in small groups with an adult mentor who works with them throughout their middle school years. Some 8th grade students become “Ambassadors,” co-leading their small group with their mentor. Said one Ambassador, “It’s like we’re the teacher and we’re running the class. We have to move from the role of friend to the role of leader. It’s not always so easy. I’ve had to learn that there’s a time to play and a time not to play.”

Story Themes: The students’ enthusiasm for Lead Peace resounds in their stories. Students speak of the value of Lead Peace – for themselves and others. They talk about “stepping up” – taking on leadership roles; learning cooperation and showing compassion. In the 2011-2012 school year, students quickly mobilized to distribute food to local area residents after a tornado. Students also packed food for families in Haiti.

It Works: Students are emphatic that Lead Peace “works” - fundamentally changing how they see themselves and their capacity to contribute to their schools and communities. Evaluation findings confirm Lead Peace students’ views. Between the 7th and 8th grade years, students reported a greater sense of school and peer connectedness, stronger social and emotional skills, and more cooperative behaviors. In turn, these pro-social connections and skills promote young people’s academic success and reduce risk for violence.

Epilogue: Lead Peace students understand that the story doesn’t end with them. One Ambassador stated that their personal experiences have a ripple affect: “… the things you learn in Lead Peace you can teach to others who are not in the program, and then they can go and tell others about it and it just keeps going on.”

Lead Peace: Evidence of Success

Lead Peace strives to improve young people’s academic success and reduce risks for violence through service learning that promotes youth leadership and healthy development.

- Lead Peace students show stronger attachment to school – a powerful predictor of academic achievement.
- During 6th and 7th grade, a time when bullying and fighting escalate, both forms of violence decreased among students in Lead Peace schools.
- Lead Peace improves interpersonal skills and increases cooperative peer behaviors – assets that reduce bullying and violence.
The young people who gathered to talk about Lead Peace on a recent July afternoon – Toniyetta Davis, Ciera Jones, and Kiyoltan Suggs – are not from the current class of Lead Peace middle school students. These young adults were, in fact, from the very first group of students to participate in Lead Peace a decade ago. Now in college or completing internships, they all agree: Lead Peace was central to their completing high school and going on to college or work.

Lead Peace began in 2002 with 14 students – 6th graders at Nellie Stone Johnson, a K-8 school in the Minneapolis Public Schools. Over the past decade, Lead Peace has grown over 10 fold to 152 students in three Minneapolis public schools. The expansion of this program suggests something remarkable is happening through Lead Peace. The recent conversation with the Lead Peace graduates provided an opportunity to reflect on the impact of Lead Peace as this first group of students enters young adulthood.
Investing in Connectedness and Contribution

To describe Lead Peace succinctly, it is a service learning program, but to students it means so much more. “Lead Peace is about young people coming together to create meaningful service learning projects to help our community, but it was also about helping us stay in school and us, in turn, helping younger kids succeed.”

These experiences have profoundly shaped students’ view of themselves and their roles in their school and community. Ciera recalls, “In 6th grade, I had no idea I could affect someone else’s life. Others – kids and adults – started seeing us differently.”

Principals at schools offering Lead Peace concur: Lead Peace gives students a sense of contribution and self-worth they often don’t experience in other aspects of their lives.

As Ciera, Toniyetta, and Kiyoltan spoke about their experiences with Lead Peace, memories flowed. Kiyoltan reflected, “I was a pretty quiet kid and I was glad I had my small group (Lead Peace), but not all the kids were so lucky”. So with help from the school principal, Kiyoltan and his friends formed Boys Who Care: welcome cards, special events, and lunch buddies created a web of support for new students. Principals from Lead Peace schools note how small group service projects such as Boys Who Care improve students’ school experience, contribute to fewer behavior problems, and help improve school climate.

Investing in Relevant Projects and Authentic Relationships

One of the guiding principles of Lead Peace is that service activities and projects are generated by the students; if service is not relevant to students, they won’t stay engaged. The three Lead Peace graduates remembered how much Toniyetta’s small group tested this principle. “The girls in my group could not stand each other, we were always fighting. Our facilitator asked us what we could do to work better together. We finally decided to do a skit for younger grades about gossiping, because that was what was going on for us at the time. We worked out our problems through the skit and we became good friends.”

Principals recognize that Lead Peace is one of the few opportunities many students have to interact with adults in a small group setting, while also being of service to others. The skill and authenticity of adult facilitators is key: “It’s like the speech is not forced from her, it’s real. She doesn’t have broken promises; she always keeps them.”

Toniyetta’s observation parallels themes from interviews with Lead Peace facilitators: dependability, respect, flexibility, intentionality, and
commitment are hallmarks of successful Lead Peace facilitators.

Long-Term Return on Academics

These Lead Peace graduates were genuinely amazed that not everyone understands the impact this program can have on academics. “Lead Peace made me want to come to school.” School attendance is important, but all three young adults were quick to point out that the skills they learned also carry forward to this day. Ciera talked about communication skills. “When I was younger, I either liked you or I didn’t. And if I didn’t like you, I didn’t talk to you. Well, I realized through my Lead Peace involvement that even if you don’t like somebody, you still have to work with them. When I learned to listen to others I became more involved in my classes.”

Learning the steps in the planning process, an essential skill for completing service learning projects, benefited these young people in high school. Toniyetta was clear: “I was able to get all of my work done during high school because I learned how to plan.” A third skill mentioned by these Lead Peace graduates was group problem solving. “You know how you feel when you get older and you think you have more independence?” observed Ciera. “Well, it gets more group dependent in high school, and especially in college. Lead Peace taught me to be okay with that and how to go into a situation where you have to work with other people.”

In the beginning years, Lead Peace concluded in 8th grade and the students scattered to different high schools across the city. The transition was difficult: Kiyoltan described high school as “start-over time”. Lead Peace was still fresh in their minds but high school had a very different atmosphere. So when their former Lead Peace facilitator offered to convene the group as 9th graders, everyone came. “It’s easy to lose your priorities during high school,” said Toniyetta. “I’d hear what others were doing and I’d say to myself … ‘it’s time to get in gear; don’t let your life to go waste’”. During one of these gatherings a student asked the facilitator to help arrange tours of area colleges, and a new door to their future opened. For two of the young adults gathered this past July, they are proudly the first in their families to attend college.

These young adults’ stories confirm that investments in Lead Peace yield bright futures.

Ten of the 14 students from the first Lead Peace class who finished 8th grade in 2004 – African-American, Hmong, and Latino youth from economically disadvantaged families – defied the odds, enrolling in college immediately after finishing high school.
With a team of colleagues from the Lead Peace schools and the University of Minnesota, Renee E. Sieving, PhD, RN, Associate Professor in the School of Nursing and Deputy Director of the Healthy Youth Development - Prevention Research Center in the Medical School's Division of Adolescent Health and Medicine, directs evaluation of short- and long-term outcomes of Lead Peace. Her research spans across a number of youth development areas, conducted in both school and clinic settings – all of it characterized as community-partnered work aimed at fostering health pathways for young people.

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